

ERNESTO "CHE" GUEVARA



THE AFRICAN **DREAM**

**THE DIARIES OF THE
REVOLUTIONARY WAR
IN THE CONGO**

"This fascinating secret history at last illuminates the missing chapter in the life of a revolutionary icon."

—SUNDAY TIMES (London)

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the missing link in the life and work of “Che” Guevara, one of the great, iconic revolutionaries of the twentieth century. His personal account of the experiences of the expeditionary force of 100 Cuban guerrilla fighters, who were under his command in the eastern Congo for seven months between April and November 1965, remained under lock and key in Havana for more than 30 years, invisible to all but the most trusted supporters of the Cuban government. It is not difficult to see why.

Ruthlessly honest, and unsparing of the weaknesses of friends and allies, Guevara’s vivid tale casts a baleful light on a forgotten but significant episode on the Cold War battlefield of newly independent Africa in the 1960s. Neither the would-be revolutionaries of the Congo nor the guerrilla fighters imported from Cuba emerge from his story with much credit, although the odds were stacked heavily against them.

In an earlier work, *Scenes from the Revolutionary War*, published in 1961, Guevara had given a glowing version of Fidel Castro’s guerrilla battles in Cuba during the 1950s, in which he himself had played an important role. Later, in his posthumously published *Bolivian Diaries*, written each night in the Bolivian wilderness in 1967, his relentless optimism gave an epic quality to the unequal struggle of a band of brothers that eventually ended in tragedy.

The book on the expedition to the Congo is quite different. Here Guevara presents an unvarnished account of what, for both the Cubans and the Congolese, was an unmitigated disaster. Some of its details began to leak out in the 1990s, when a handful of the surviving Cuban participants began

to feel that it was time to tell the story, as one book title puts it, of "The Year When We Were Nowhere". Guevara's deputy commander, Captain Víctor Dreke, here code-named Moja, and Pablo Rivalta, the Cuban ambassador in Dar es Salaam, both revealed important chunks of the story when being interviewed for these earlier books. Yet Guevara's account is unique, not just for the light it sheds on this otherwise obscure episode, but because he was writing with a political purpose.

The book was written over two months, in December 1965 and January 1966, in a small upstairs room in Rivalta's embassy. Guevara, then aged 37, pillaged his own reports and diaries and produced a book designed for the eyes of Castro and the leaders of the Cuban Revolution, to provide them with information and analysis that would help them avoid future pitfalls in their unfolding relationship with revolutionary movements around the world.

In her foreword to this book, Aleida March, Guevara's widow, reveals how Castro had found the text "extremely interesting", and subsequent events suggest that the Cubans took its lessons to heart. For in spite of the Congo disaster, Castro's government continued to provide political support and military assistance to revolutionary movements and radical governments in different parts of Africa – notably in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique, as well as in Eritrea and Ethiopia – and it did so with considerable success. The military victories won by Cuban soldiers in Angola in 1975–6 and in 1987–8, in support of the legitimate government and against the South African army, were an important factor in the ultimate collapse of white rule in Namibia and in South Africa itself.

Guevara, too, learnt lessons from the Congo, and he applied them in his expedition to Bolivia a year later. Indeed this book clears up some of the remaining mysteries of that catastrophic episode. In the Congo, the inadequate leadership provided by Laurent Kabila and other Congolese politicians stands out as one of the principal causes of the debacle, and after his experiences there Guevara was adamant that the political and military control of the guerrilla force should remain in his own hands. When he

arrived in Bolivia in November 1966, he refused to play second fiddle to the febrile and indecisive leader of the local Communist Party.

Guevara himself indicated that his Congo book would probably not appear until "many years have passed". Yet he can hardly have imagined that Laurent Kabila, the 26-year-old anti-hero of his story, a man he describes as lacking in "revolutionary seriousness", would re-emerge some 32 years later, in exactly the same area of the eastern Congo where the Cubans had once fought. In 1997, in the aftermath of the upheavals caused by the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, Kabila's forces swept across the Congo to Leopoldville-Kinshasa, with support from Rwanda and Uganda. Within weeks, they had toppled the dictatorship of General Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, the man who had seized power in November 1965 in the very week in which Guevara had been obliged to withdraw from the country.

The excitement occasioned by the overthrow of Mobutu and the accession of President Kabila did not last long, although Aleida March describes how she was able to take part in the 1998 celebrations that marked the first anniversary of what she calls "the victory of the Congolese revolution". In subsequent years, the Congo has reverted to the state of civil war that characterized the early post-independence period after 1960, with soldiers from no less than six surrounding countries participating in this fratricidal conflict. "[Kabila] is young," wrote Guevara in 1966, "and it is possible that he will change. But . . . I have very great doubts about his ability to overcome his defects in the environment in which he operates." Anyone reading this book will reckon that Guevara had taken the true measure of the man.

★

Ernesto Che Guevara was born into a middle-class family in Argentina on 14 June, 1928. Although trained as a doctor, he also had ambitions to write. Travelling widely in Latin America as a young man, famously by motorcycle, he became familiar with the grim conditions in which most people lived. His early concern for the poor, and his later belief that their

lot could be improved through violent revolution, fuelled his actions for the rest of his life.

Present in Guatemala during the CIA-assisted overthrow of the progressive government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, he acquired an implacable hatred of the United States. When he met Fidel Castro in Mexico the following year, he immediately signed up to his project to liberate Cuba and launch the Revolution. Such were his leadership skills that he became the senior commander in the rebel army, capturing the strategic town of Santa Clara on the eve of victory. His Cuban experience enabled him to develop theories of guerrilla warfare that he would later attempt to put into practice in the Congo and in Bolivia.

In Castro's new Revolutionary government, Guevara had a variety of senior roles, first and foremost as the economic czar and as the unofficial foreign minister. He was also tireless in organizing Cuba's political links with the newly emerging Third World. Yet his hopes of returning to a more active role in the revolutionary struggle did not decline with the years. In the course of 1964, he was clearly looking for an opportunity to leave Cuba. "Once again I feel under my heels the ribs of Rocinante," he wrote to his parents when he left for the Congo in 1965, conjuring up the image of Don Quixote and his horse.

"Many will call me an adventurer," he wrote, "and indeed I am". But he saw himself as an adventurer of an unusual type, to be counted among those "who put their lives on the line to demonstrate their truths". Therein lies the enduring appeal of Ernesto Che Guevara, a man who participated in one successful revolution and threw it all up to start again from scratch.

Guevara's expedition to the Congo has often been perceived as the personal whim of a professional revolutionary, a man bored with the tedium of a bureaucratized revolution who gathered together a group of friends to seek new challenges in distant lands. Yet this was only part of the story. His version of events in the Congo makes clear that some kind of Congo expedition was being planned by the Cuban government before his own involvement had been agreed. Aleida March includes a note from Castro to Che, in December 1964, in which the Cuban leader indicates that various

choices were under discussion and that nothing would be decided until after Guevara had visited the Algerian president Ahmed Ben Bella, then Cuba's principal ally in Africa.

In the light of subsequent history, in which Cuba's continuing interest in Africa became clear for all to see, the intervention in the Congo can be seen as the first attempt by the Cuban Revolution to break out of the international straitjacket imposed on it by the United States. Denied support from governments in Latin America, who were all dragooned into opposing him by the United States, Castro made an imaginative leapfrog across the Atlantic. There he found a continent where post-colonial rhetoric was at its height, at least in some of the newly independent states, and where radical opposition movements existed in countries that were still under colonial control. After Guevara's death in 1967, when sponsorship of guerrilla movements in Latin America must have seemed a lost cause, Castro took an even closer interest in the cause of revolution in Africa.

Unlike the Bolivian episode of 1967, which was essentially a backroom operation supported by a few of Guevara's friends in the Cuban secret service and the ministry of the interior, the Congo expedition of 1965 was a major enterprise of the Cuban state. While one "column" of 120 men was sent to Tanzania in dribs and drabs, to be shipped across Lake Tanganyika into North Katanga, a second "column" of 200 men (the "Patrice Lumumba battalion") was sent to the other side of the continent, to a base near Brazzaville, the capital of Congo-Brazzaville, across the Congo River from Leopoldville-Kinshasa, the capital of the Congo-Zaire.

The eastern column, which arrived in Africa in April 1965, was commanded by Che Guevara, supported by several senior members of the Cuban government, while the western column, which came in September, was commanded by Jorge Risquet, a member of the central committee of the Cuban Communist Party. The deputy interior minister, Oscar Fernández Padilla (referred to in this book as "Rafael"), was the liaison officer between the two columns, and based himself in Dar es Salaam.

Guevara's task was to train the Congolese guerrilla forces in the east; Risquet's to train the embryonic guerrilla forces of Agostinho Neto in

Angola and in Cabinda, the Portuguese enclave at the mouth of the Congo River, and to assist a Congolese guerrilla force going to the aid of Pierre Mulele in Kwilu. He was also expected to stiffen up the army of Alphonse Massemba-Débat, the President of Congo-Brazzaville, against possible attacks from Leopoldville-Kinshasa.

Although the Cuban government assumed these very specific responsibilities in Africa, it would be a mistake to underestimate Guevara's own personal interest in promoting the "struggle against Yankee imperialism" that he described as "the great contemporary issue". The renewed Congo crisis of 1964 had coincided with the expansion of United States forces in Vietnam, and the start of the American bombing of North Vietnam, in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 1964. Guevara was to write a famous pamphlet, "Create Two, Three, Many Vietnams", published in 1967 when he was fighting in Bolivia. In his Congo book, too, he spelt out what he perceived to be the need to attack "Yankee imperialism" at the roots of its power: "in the colonial and neo-colonial lands that serve as the underpinning of its world domination."

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The prolonged international crisis brought about by events in the Congo from 1960 to 1963 is now all but forgotten. Yet it once occupied the same role on the world stage as the events in former Yugoslavia did in the 1990s – with the added drama of Cold War tensions. The Congo's independence from Belgium was secured rather suddenly in June 1960 by a left-wing prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and no one was prepared for the series of dramatic developments that followed: an army mutiny; the secession of Katanga, the country's richest province, organized by Moises Tshombe; the return of Belgian soldiers who had only just left; and the arrival of United Nations troops, at Lumumba's request, to protect the country's territorial integrity.

When Lumumba also asked for Soviet military assistance, he was promptly deposed by President Joseph Kasavubu, whose decision was supported by

the commander-in-chief, Joseph Mobutu. Other notable moments in the Congo tragedy were the assassination of Lumumba (a murder planned by the CIA but executed by Tshombe) and the death in a plane crash of Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN secretary-general. This was no small crisis.

The Congo monopolized the world's headlines for more than three years, becoming a test case for the continent. Would the about-to-be-independent African nations really be independent, or would they fall back into the hands of "the imperialists"? Alternatively, were they about to be taken over by "the Communists"? These were the themes that exercised the Cold War capitals, and they were ones with which the Cubans themselves had already become familiar in the aftermath of their own revolution in January 1959. Yet by the end of 1963, the heat appeared to have gone out of the African crisis. The Congo was left in the hands of Cyrille Adoula, a weak and unpopular prime minister; the United Nations began planning to withdraw its troops; and international attention was focused elsewhere.

But history does not stop just because no one is looking, and a chain of rebellions throughout the Congo early in 1964 – invoking the name and the radical rhetoric established by Lumumba – seemed to herald new and significant developments more profound than the disorders of 1960. The rebellions were backed by an umbrella organization of leftist opposition groups called the "National Liberation Council" that established itself in Brazzaville in October 1963 after the Congolese parliament in Leopoldville-Kinshasa had been closed down by Adoula.

The rebellions sponsored by the Liberation Council took place in four specific areas of the Congo. The first, begun in January 1964 by 36-year-old Pierre Mulele, once Lumumba's minister of education and later the ambassador in Cairo, erupted in the west of the country in the province of Kwilu, east of Leopoldville-Kinshasa. Mulele, who said he was fighting for the Congo's "second independence", had spent time in China and secured promises of support from Peking. His deputy was Vitale Pascasa.

The second revolt was launched in the north-east of the country in February 1964 by a local politician, 43-year-old Gaston Soumaliot. He

moved across the frontier from his base in the Burundi capital of Bujumbura, and spread out into the Uvira region in the province of Kivu. Like Mulele, he was supported by the Chinese, who had recently been able to open an embassy in Bujumbura.

A third rebellion was orchestrated by Soumaliot's lieutenant, Laurent Kabila, an articulate assembly member from North Katanga who had been a student in Paris and Belgrade. Kabila's forces, chiefly Babembe warriors from the area around Fizi, moved down the western shores of Lake Tanganyika in June 1964 and occupied the important town of Albertville-Kalemie. Here Kabila hoped to establish "a provisional government for the liberated territories in the east". This lakeside region was the area to which Guevara and his Cuban guerrillas were to come a year later. Among Kabila's supporters in 1964 were Leonard Mitoudidi and 30-year-old Ildephonse Masengo, who were to be Guevara's closest Congolese collaborators in 1965. For a few weeks in the middle of 1964, the rebel forces controlled much of the east of the Congo, even appearing to threaten the government's military complex at Kamina, in the heart of the country.

The fourth centre of revolt lay in the north, where a rebel force led by Nicolas Olenga marched on Stanleyville-Kisangani, on the upper reaches of the Congo River, and captured it at the beginning of August 1964. A "People's Republic of the Congo" was established there, presided over by Christophe Gbenye, a former minister of the interior in Lumumba's government in 1960, and a man with a strong claim to be regarded as Lumumba's political heir. Gbenye's "foreign minister" was Thomas Kanza, who had earlier been the Congo's ambassador in London.

By the middle of 1964, the old Lumumbist left – backed by China and the Soviet Union – controlled much of the Congo. Yet its triumph was by no means secure. Political divisions between the various political leaders continued to bedevil the revolutionary forces, as indeed they had done ever since 1960, and the rebellions soon came to the attention of the new government in the United States. President Lyndon Johnson had taken over after the assassination of John Kennedy in November 1963, and was to be faced at the presidential elections of November 1964 by an ultra

right-wing Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater. Already embroiled in an escalating war in Vietnam, Johnson had no intention of being seen as "soft on Communism" in Africa.

The Americans expressed alarm at two African developments at the beginning of 1964: the multi-faceted rebellions in the Congo and the prospect of an imminent withdrawal of United Nations forces, and a left-wing revolution in Zanzibar, immediately perceived as a Communist bridge-head in the Indian Ocean. The Zanzibari revolutionaries were outspoken supporters of Castro's revolution, and saw their offshore island as a second Cuba.

To keep an eye on this potential threat, the Americans sent Frank Carlucci, a diplomat with experience in South Africa and the Congo (and later, in the 1980s, to be President Reagan's defence secretary), to be the US consul in Zanzibar in February. The following month Averell Harriman, a veteran diplomat of the Cold War appointed as President Johnson's African trouble-shooter, arrived in Leopoldville-Kinshasa to assess the situation.

Together with Cyrus Vance, the US deputy defence secretary, Harriman drew up plans for an American airlift to the Congo. Planes and helicopters, and T-28 fighter-bombers, secretly funded from the budget of the Agency for International Development (USAID), began arriving in May, expanding the existing stop-gap arrangement devised by the Central Intelligence Agency. Alarmed by the impact of Mulele's rebellion in Kwilu, the CIA station chief in Leopoldville-Kinshasa had suggested that T-6 training planes might be armed to help control it. These were Second World War planes brought to the Congo as part of a training programme for the embryonic Congolese airforce organized by the Italians. The Americans modified them to carry air-to-ground missiles and .30 calibre machine-guns.

The CIA recruited a number of pilots from the Cuban exile community in Florida, many of whom were veterans of the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961. The pilots were contracted at the rate of US\$2,000 a month, with the promise that they would be rescued by helicopter should their planes be forced down in the jungle. The pilots established a base

at Kikwit, the capital of Kivu, and had already begun operations against Mulele by the middle of February.

To provide support services for the Congolese airforce, and to look after the Cuban exile pilots, the CIA created a small unit, code-named WIGMO, or Western International Ground Maintenance Organisation, with a corporate headquarters in Liechtenstein. Guevara was to find traces of the existence of WIGMO when a number of mercenaries were ambushed by the Cuban guerrillas in October 1965.

A by-product of this renewed American interest in the Congo was a change of regime in Leopoldville-Kinshasa. Moises Tshombe, the old separatist leader from Katanga, seized power from Adoula in July 1964 and immediately sought external support to put down the rebellion that controlled half the country in the north and the east. United Nations troops had been withdrawn at the end of June, and what was left of the Congolese army was hardly reliable. The Americans suggested to Tshombe that he should recruit white mercenary soldiers from southern Africa, as he had done earlier in Katanga in 1960-61. These were to be organized and led by Colonel Mike Hoare, a veteran of the Burma campaign in the Second World War, who had helped Tshombe in Katanga in 1960. At that time the mercenaries had come to "save" Katanga from Lumumba; now they would return to save the Congo itself from "Communism".

The Americans worked through General Mobutu, the army commander-in-chief since independence, and Mobutu told Hoare to recruit 1,000 men in South Africa and Rhodesia. At the same time, the former commander of the Belgian paramilitary police force in the Congo, Colonel Frédéric Vandewalle, was brought in, together with a number of Belgian officers, to stiffen up the Congolese army. Colonel Vandewalle had been Tshombe's adviser between 1961 and 1963.

Tshombe's return to the political scene, coupled with his appeal for assistance to the United States, to Belgium, and to South Africa, left his government diplomatically isolated in Black Africa. A group of radical African states, notably Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Tanzania (which had formed a political union with Zanzibar in April), expressed

their opposition to what looked like the re-imposition of colonial rule in the Congo – with Tshombe as a black puppet leader. They moved towards recognizing the government that Gbenye had established in Stanleyville-Kisangani, and taking practical steps to help it. At the conference of the fledgling Organisation of African States at Cairo in July, the Congo was high on the agenda, as it was at the second conference of non-aligned states in October, also held in Cairo, attended by a high-level delegation from Cuba.

The task of the army of white mercenaries assembled by Colonel Vandewalle and Colonel Hoare was to crush the rebellions. Recapturing Albertville with ease, they then began to advance from Kamina towards Stanleyville-Kisangani, in an operation code-named "Ommegang". As a counter-measure, the Gbenye government in Stanleyville seized as hostages many of the European expatriates, several of whom were missionaries, living in their zone. By the middle of November, as accounts of atrocities permitted by the authorities in Stanleyville spread, the Americans decided that they would have to take more extreme measures. They could not rely solely on the mercenary army marching up from the south.

A fresh plan was devised, "Operation Dragon Rouge", to drop Belgian paratroopers on Stanleyville from US transport planes. The paras were flown in from Britain's South Atlantic base on Ascension Island, with the permission of the recently elected British Labour government of Harold Wilson. They arrived, on the face of it, to protect the lives of Europeans being held "hostage", but their drop was purposefully timed to coincide with the arrival of the mercenary column, and thus to ensure the capture of Stanleyville. Ostensibly undertaken to save European missionaries, the Belgian and mercenary operation in and around the town left more than 200 Europeans and uncounted Africans dead.

The immediate result was to unite Africa's radical governments in yet fiercer opposition to the Tshombe regime. President Ben Bella of Algeria and President Nasser of Egypt announced that they would now supply the Congolese rebels with arms and soldiers, and they also asked others for help.

This was the spark that launched Cuba's direct involvement in the affairs of the Congo, for Cuba and Algeria had already been working closely together on revolutionary projects. Cuba had first helped the Algerian revolutionaries in 1961, sending them a large quantity of American weapons captured after the failed CIA operation at the Bay of Pigs. The weapons supply on that occasion was organized by Jorge Masetti, an Argentine friend of Guevara who had been instrumental in setting up the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina. Masetti had made plans subsequently to create a Cuban-style guerrilla movement in his native Argentina, and after Algeria gained independence in July 1962, he and Guevara secured Algerian help in the training of a group of Argentine guerrillas.

The Algerians provided many forms of practical assistance, even sending two agents with the guerrillas from Algiers to Bolivia in June 1963. The campaign never got properly off the ground, and it collapsed in April 1964 with the disappearance and unverified death of Masetti. Later that year, when the Algerians suggested that the Cubans might like to provide reciprocal assistance to their friends in the Congo, the Cubans were happy to oblige.

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The Stanleyville paratroop landings caused an international furore, and early in December Guevara arrived in New York, as the Cuban delegate to the General Assembly of the United Nations. In an impassioned speech on 11 December that referred to "the tragic case of the Congo", he denounced "this unacceptable intervention". It was, he said, "a case without parallel in the modern world", and showed "how the rights of peoples can be flouted with absolute impunity and the most insolent cynicism".

At the root of the problem, Guevara went on, were "the Congo's vast resources which the imperialists wish to keep under their control". This, he said, was the explanation why "those who used the name of the United Nations in order to perpetrate the assassination of Lumumba are today murdering thousands of Congolese, in the name of the defence of the

white race". How can we forget, he continued, "the way in which Patrice Lumumba's hopes in the United Nations were betrayed"?

The crowning insult, Guevara continued, were "the recent actions that have filled the world with indignation". Who were the perpetrators? "Belgian paratroopers, transported by United States aircraft, which took off from British bases." And he finished with a rhetorical flourish: "Free men throughout the world must prepare to avenge the Congo crime." Guevara himself was soon on his way to do just that.

Leaving New York, he embarked on a long tour of Africa, visiting the radical African states that were supporting the cause of the Congolese rebels. He flew first to Algiers to discuss the Congo with Ben Bella. In January and February 1965, he travelled on through the other radical states, calling at Mali, Congo-Brazzaville, Senegal, Ghana, Dahomey, Egypt and Tanzania. At each place he stopped, he was briefed on the situation in the various parts of the Congo by the different parties to the struggle. In Brazzaville, he met President Alphonse Massemba-Débat who asked for Cuban assistance to be provided to the forces of Pierre Mulele. In Dar es Salaam he saw Laurent Kabila, who sought help for what was left of his liberated area in the east of the Congo. In Cairo he had long discussions with Gaston Soumaliot, who wanted men and money for what had been the Stanleyville front. The only significant Congolese leader he failed to see was Christophe Gbenye, a man much mistrusted who was eventually to make his own deal with Leopoldville. In Brazzaville, Guevara also met the Angolan leader, Agostinho Neto, who asked the Cubans to provide help for the Angolan liberation army, the MPLA – the start of a long relationship.

It was not easy to weave a way through the various requests. The geographic dispersion of the Congolese revolutionary forces, and the different agendas of both themselves and their foreign backers, were to prove lasting problems in the months ahead. As his book reveals, Guevara was left in no doubt about the serious infighting within the Congolese leadership.

The Cubans had an agenda too, not always appreciated by those who required their help. They planned to construct a Third World alliance of all those opposed to American imperialism. In this context, they needed to

know the attitude of the chief external supporter of the Congolese rebels: China. Early in February, Guevara flew from Cairo to Peking, accompanied by two senior Cuban figures who were to join him in the Congo later in the year, Osmany Cienfuegos, codenamed Bracero, and Emilio Aragonés, code-named Tembo. Both men were part of the inner group of Cubans making plans for the Congo expeditionary force.

The Chinese at that time were advocating the strategic notions of Lin Biao, the defence minister, who had famously advocated the encirclement of degenerate cities by radical revolutionary peasants. This of course was music to the ears of Guevara, though less attractive to the Soviet Union, then embroiled, over a wide range of issues, in the great Sino-Soviet dispute – an argument that was dividing the entire Communist world.

While the Chinese had initially been friendly towards Castro's revolution, they had become disillusioned after what they perceived as Khrushchev's "gamble" during the October missile crisis of 1962. By the time of Guevara's visit, they were additionally irritated by the Cuban failure to corral the Communist parties of Latin America into the Chinese camp. Over the course of 1965, they lost all interest in Cuba – for the next 30 years.

In Peking, Guevara's team met several officials specializing in African affairs, including Chou En-lai, who had made a long tour through Africa a year earlier. Between December 1963 and February 1964, the Chinese premier had visited Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Soon after his discussions with Guevara, Chou En-lai was to make a second visit to Algiers and Cairo in March 1965, possibly to meet Congolese leaders, and in June, when Guevara was already based in the Congo, he flew to Tanzania and held meetings with Kabila and Soumaliot.

Guevara left Peking to return to Cairo, and then flew south to Dar es Salaam. Tanzania was then a leading radical state, the government of Julius Nyerere moving leftwards after the union with Zanzibar, and Dar es Salaam was the headquarters of the various liberation movements recognized by the Organisation of African Unity. Guevara spent a week

there in February, holding meetings with both Kabila and Soumaliot. He also met a number of the "freedom fighters" who were based there, with whom, as he describes in his book, he had fierce political arguments.

Flying back to Cairo early in March, he held discussions with Colonel Nasser, hinting for the first time that he might himself join the struggle in the Congo. Nasser proved less than enthusiastic about any such plans. According to the account of the meeting by Nasser's son-in-law, the editor and journalist Mohammed Heikal, Guevara told him that he was going to take charge of a group of black Cubans that would be fighting in the Congo.

"I shall go the Congo", Guevara said, "because it is the hottest spot in the world now . . . I think we can hurt the imperialists at the core of their interests in Katanga."

Heikal recalls that Nasser was astonished, warning Guevara not to become "another Tarzan, a white man among black men, leading them and protecting them . . ." Nasser shook his head sadly: "It can't be done."

But Guevara had made up his mind, and it only remained for him to return to Cuba to see how the preparations for the Congo expedition were progressing. He arrived in Havana after his extended two-month trip away on 14 March, 1965, to be greeted at the airport by Castro. This was effectively Guevara's last public appearance. From then on, he "disappeared", never to be seen in public again until his dead body was exhibited in Vallegrande in Bolivia in October 1967. This book reveals what he was doing in 1965, during the first year of his "disappearance".

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The Cuban decision to intervene in the Congo had already been made before Guevara's return to Havana. An elite group of 150 guerrillas, all volunteers and all black, had been recruited at the beginning of the year and were undergoing training at three different camps in Cuba. They were not told of their destination, though the fact that they were all black had led several of them to suppose that it might be Africa. Black soldiers had been requested by Soumaliot in order that they should be differentiated

from the white mercenaries employed by Tshombe. As Guevara admits in his book, this was neither a necessary nor a wise choice. Subsequent Cuban military expeditions to Africa employed both white and black soldiers.

The leader of the Cuban troops was Captain Víctor Dreke, code-named Moja, a participant in the Cuban war who was well known to Guevara. He had subsequently been involved in containing the long-drawn-out anti-Castro rebellion in the Escambray mountains – which finally ground to a halt in 1964. Years later, at the end of the 1960s, Dreke was to be part of the Cuban military mission to the forces of Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau.

The only question in the minds of the Cuban leadership, as they waited for Guevara to return, was whether Guevara would choose to lead the new revolutionary force. Although he had been involved in the planning of the various Latin America guerrilla projects of previous years, Guevara had not gone to Peru, Bolivia or Argentina himself. Now he had an opportunity to participate, and by the time he returned from his African trip, his mind was made up.

Captain Dreke had some perspicacious comments to add to this story, but his evidence – obtained in 1990, a quarter of a century after the event – sometimes reads as though it were made up of his subsequent thoughts; as though he were trying to explain to a later generation of Cubans what had actually been going on.

"I suppose that Che decided to participate in the project after his African trip. It went against his original idea to go and fight in Argentina. The assassination of Lumumba and the general situation in the Congo had led him to take an interest in the guerrilla struggle there. It enabled him to follow a double objective: to prepare a group for Latin America, and to create a third front [against imperialism], in Vietnam, Latin America, and Africa. These were the ideas that he wished to bring to fruition. Africa seemed easier than Latin America . . . The moment had come to act in Africa."

At the end of March 1965, a small advance guard of the guerrillas in training came to Havana from the camps in the country, and made their

final preparations to leave Cuba. At the last moment, Dreke was taken aside by Osmany Cienfuegos, the minister of construction, and told that their destination was to be the Congo – and that Che Guevara was to be the leader of the expedition.

Guevara aside, the only other white member of the expedition at the start was 27-year-old José-María Martínez Tamayo, code-named Mbili, a Cuban secret service officer. He was already one of the most significant figures in Cuba's international military activities, and had been a close collaborator of Guevara over several years. Originally a tractor driver in Holguín Province, he had joined Castro's July 26 Movement and the Rebel Army in April 1958, at which time he came under Guevara's command. Subsequently he had worked with the embryonic Guatemalan guerrilla movement in 1962, and had gone to Bolivia in March 1963 to organize the base camp for the Argentine guerrilla movement organized by Guevara's friend Masetti, with the assistance of the Algerians.

In the year after the Congo expedition, Martínez Tamayo was to return to Bolivia in March 1966 to re-activate the revolutionary support movement there and to prepare the ground for Guevara's arrival. He was joined in Bolivia by his brother, Arturo, and both of them were killed there: Mbili (known in the Bolivian campaign as Ricardo) on 30 July, 1967, and Arturo on 8 October the same year, during the engagement in which Guevara was captured.

On the evening of 1 April, 1965, Fidel came round to the guerrilla base in Havana to say goodbye. Guevara had only been back in Havana for three weeks. Now he was to set off again. Although his leadership of the Congo expeditionary force had Castro's backing, no one was to know – not even the Congolese – that he was going to go back to Africa. His presence was to be kept absolutely secret. He flew off, heavily disguised, on a plane to Moscow. The small group of Cubans travelled on from there to Cairo, and then on to Dar es Salaam, where they arrived on 19 April.

Before he left, Guevara wrote his famous farewell letter to Fidel – which was to be read out publicly in Havana six months later in October. "I feel that I have fulfilled that part of my duty which bound me to

the Cuban Revolution on its own territory . . . I have no legal ties to Cuba . . . Other nations are calling for the aid of my modest efforts . . ."

It was a carefully constructed letter, suggesting that although Guevara was undoubtedly engaged on an operation supported by the Cuban state, his actions could be disavowed by the leadership should that be necessary. "I can do," he wrote to Fidel, "what you are unable to do because of your responsibility as Cuban leader". Guevara emphasized that both he and Castro were at one on this matter: "I have always identified myself with the foreign policy of our Revolution, and I continue to do so."

The letter was an important propaganda device, but at the very end of the Congolese venture, in the month after its publication in Havana, Guevara was to wish that he had not been so specific, or that Fidel had not released the text. His renunciation of his Cuban citizenship was to cause him serious difficulties with his guerrilla band.

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The Guevara's group of Cuban revolutionaries were greeted at the airport outside Dar es Salaam by the new Cuban ambassador, Pablo Rivalta, a schoolteacher by origin, who had set up the embassy in Tanzania a few months earlier. Rivalta had fought in the Cuban revolutionary war and been picked out at an early stage for duty in Africa. Fidel had asked him to take a message to Patrice Lumumba in 1960, although the trip had never materialized. As Cuban ambassador in Dar, Rivalta had had the full cooperation of the Tanzanian government. President Julius Nyerere had told him that if he ever had a problem he had only to put a flag on his car and drive round to State House. Rivalta had made contact with the various African liberation movements, as well as with Abdul Rahman Babu, the *éminence grise* behind the revolution in Zanzibar, who had become a minister in Tanzania. (Babu died in London in August 1996.)

Guevara was concerned that the arrival of such a large group of foreign blacks might alert the suspicions of the CIA, but he should not have worried. Frank Carlucci, the American diplomat appointed as consul in

Zanzibar, had been transferred to the US embassy in Dar and then accused by the Tanzanian government in January of being overly involved in Zanzibari affairs. He was expelled from the country (to turn up as the US ambassador in Lisbon during the Portuguese revolution in 1975), and the United States withdrew its ambassador from Dar in protest. The American intelligence agency in East Africa was working now under adverse conditions, and had inadequate resources to keep a check on airport arrivals. Indeed, so badly informed were the Americans about Guevara's movements that every reference to his Congo expedition until the 1990s suggested that he had entered the country through Brazzaville.

The group of Cubans was in some initial difficulty in Dar. No senior Congolese political figures were available with whom they could discuss future plans. Soumaliot and Kabila were away at a prolonged meeting in Cairo, as were their deputies Ildephonse Masengo and Leonard Mitoudidi. These men were supposed to be patching up the political differences within their revolutionary movement – a discouraging indication of what was to come. Since no one knew that Guevara formed part of the Cuban contingent, the Congolese in Dar initially paid him no great attention. The junior figure in charge, Antoine Godefroi Chamaleso, known to the Cubans as Tremendo Punto, was wholly without authority to make important decisions, though he did agree that the group should be allowed to make its way across Tanzania to Lake Tanganyika.

It was clear, from the start, that Che Guevara and the Africans were not going to see eye to eye. Guevara was to have similar difficulties the following year with the Bolivians. Local politicians, however hard-pressed, rarely like outsiders to come and tell them how to run their revolutions. The Cubans were internationalists in the purest sense: they had come to combat the American "imperialists" wherever they appeared, and to further the interests of the world revolution. The Congolese for the most part (and later the leaders of the Bolivian Communist Party) had no such large ambitions. They were circumscribed by their own petty nationalisms, their internal feuds, and their lack of knowledge about the politics of the wider world.

Pablo Rivalta had long discussions with Guevara about his intentions in Africa and gave an account years later of what he perceived to be Guevara's plan. "The Congo would serve as a base, as a detonator to set off revolution in all the African countries; it occupied, above all, a strategic position close to South Africa. The struggle itself, the training, and the impetus provided to the Congolese Liberation Movement, would be useful to all the other countries, and particularly South Africa. That was his idea."

Guevara's central plan was to take advantage of the existing liberated zone on the western shores of Lake Tanganyika and to use it as an enormous training ground, both for the Congolese and for guerrilla fighters from other liberation movements. The area was in the centre of the continent and was bordered by a friendly country (Tanzania). It seemed like a text-book case, and a year later he was to try to repeat the experiment in Bolivia, creating his own "liberated zone" on the edge of the Chaco where guerrillas from several nations could come for training.

It was not an outlandish ambition, indeed it was a mirror image of what the United States had already begun to do in the Panama Canal Zone. To the large American-owned "Zone" liberated from Panama at the turn of the century, and controlled by the Pentagon ever since, the Americans had brought officers from all over Latin America. There, in the local jungle conditions and using Spanish as the medium of instruction, these officers were taught the newly fashionable techniques of counter-insurgency that the Americans had developed in Vietnam. The Cubans, on the opposing side, could do no less.

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On 22 April, 1965, Guevara's small group of 14 Cubans set off in three Mercedes-Benz cars on the road from Dar es Salaam to Lake Tanganyika. This was the dry season, hot in the day, cold at night. They were accompanied by a lorry carrying a motorboat purchased on the coast, to be used to ferry them over the lake to the Congo. They travelled in convoy across the country, passing through Dodoma to the lakeside town of Kigoma.

Adjacent to Kigoma stands the village of Ujiji, where the missionary David Livingstone and the American journalist Henry Stanley had an historic encounter almost a hundred years before, in 1871.

Before they left Dar, Guevara picked up his Swahili dictionary and gave each Cuban a pseudonym from the Swahili alphabet: Moja, one, for Captain Víctor Dreke; Mbili, two, for José-María Martínez Tamayo; and Tatu, three, for Guevara himself. Their code-names were to be the subject of some confusion. The Congolese got to know Guevara as Tatu, the number three in the group, the white man who was allegedly there as an interpreter. Yet Moja and Mbili, with numbers one and two, were clearly the leaders. So why, the Congolese wondered, was Tatu the man who always seemed to be in charge?

The little group established a supply base at Kigoma and then crossed the lake to the Congolese village of Kibamba, directly on the other side. They were welcomed there by a well-armed group of Congolese from the People's Liberation Army, dressed in khaki fatigues provided by the Chinese. Slogans were shouted, and songs sung. One of their number, fortunately for Guevara, spoke French. The Cubans were favourably impressed by the quality and quantity of the soldiers' equipment. Armaments, munitions, and clothing seemed always to be available. After the initial welcome, the Cubans made a camp for themselves outside the village. This was the start of a campaign that was to last seven months.

Guevara only had rather sketchy information about the terrain of the "liberated zone" in which his men would be expected to operate. Albertville-Kalemie in the south and Bukavu in the north had both been recaptured by Colonel Hoare's mercenaries more than six months earlier, but the towns of Fizi and Baraka were still in friendly hands. Colonel Hoare described the "mountain fastness" in which the Cubans now found themselves in his book *Congo Mercenary*, published in 1967: "The Fizi Baraka pocket of resistance covered an area twice the size of Wales. It stretched from Uvira at the top of Lake Tanganyika south along the coast for 150 miles to Kabimba, which was 30 miles north of Albertville, and inland to Kasongo on the Lualaba. It was a land of sudden escarpments, rushing rivers, and twisting tracks."

More surprising to the Cubans than the terrain was the presence in the area of thousands of Tutsis from Rwanda, of whom they had no prior knowledge. A group of some 4,000 Tutsis shared the defence of the region with the Congolese. Their Chinese-trained leader, Colonel Joseph Mundandi, was often involved in negotiations elsewhere, but he turned up with Kabila at Kibamba in the middle of June, after discussions with Chou En-lai in Dar es Salaam. Many of the Tutsi had lived in these parts for centuries, while others had taken refuge there after a Hutu massacre at the time of independence. Ousted from Rwanda, they were hoping to return to their country on the back of a successful revolution in the Congo.

Over the next few months, a fresh bunch of fighters arrived from Cuba every few weeks. The first group of 18 men arrived on 8 May, commanded by 35-year-old Santiago Terry Rodríguez, codenamed Aly, who had fought with Guevara in the revolutionary war in Cuba. (He survived the Congo, but was later killed in an accident in Cuba.)

A second group of 34 came at the end of May, accompanied by Osmany Cienfuegos, code-named Bracero, and a third group of 39 arrived on 24 June, with a man sent by Castro to act as Guevara's bodyguard. This was the 25-year-old Harry Villegas, known as Pombo, another veteran of Guevara's column in the revolutionary war, who had later worked with him in the ministry of industry. Pombo was subsequently to be part of the advance guard sent out to Bolivia in July 1966 and, after the death of Guevara in October 1967, he was the leader of the small guerrilla group that successfully avoided capture, escaped to Chile, and arrived back safely in Havana. He returned to Africa to fight in Angola in 1975, and again, between 1981 and 1990.

A fourth group arrived from Cuba at the end of September, led by Emilio Aragonés, code-named Tembo (the elephant), with whom Guevara had visited Peking in February, and Óscar Fernández Mell, code-named Siki, a doctor (later the Cuban ambassador in London) who had fought in the Cuban war and was one of Guevara's closest friends. Both were senior figures in the Cuban government, Aragonés being the organization secretary of the newly reorganised Cuban Communist Party.

The fifth and final Cuban group came at the beginning of October, accompanied by José Ramón Machado Ventura ("Machadito"), the minister of health, who had been sent from Havana to verify whether the Congolese request for 50 doctors was really justified.

In the middle of May, after the arrival of the first Cuban group, Guevara's small band moved from its lakeside camp at Kibamba to an "Upper Base" on the Luluabourg mountain, the highest in the chain of mountains along the lake, some five kilometres from Kibamba. This was a four-hour march from the lake, uphill all the way. "Quite unlike the hills of Cuba," noted one Cuban, "with a thick fog until ten in the morning that you could cut with a knife." The Cubans were unprepared for the mountains, having been told during their training in Cuba that the terrain would be flat jungle.

Guevara and Martínez Tamayo (Mbili) now formulated a plan with the two Congolese commanders, Leonard Mitoudidi and Antoine Chamaleso (Tremendo Punto), for exploring the zone. The Cubans would make a four-pronged probing expedition from their Upper Base: east to Lulimba, south to Bendera and Kabimba, north to Fizi and Baraka. The explorations, which lasted for two weeks, were led by Captain Dreke (Moja) and Mbili, while Guevara remained behind, to await the arrival of Laurent Kabila. The Cuban reconnaissance force encountered a number of friendly troops, but they noted that the forward bases of the enemy were well defended. In the Fizi sector, Moja thought that the morale of the Congo rebels was rather low, and when they moved forward to reconnoitre the Tshombe camp outside the town, they discovered a short landing strip for small planes and helicopters and saw a number of white soldiers for the first time.

When the exploring groups returned, Guevara summed up in two words what they told him they had found: incompetence and disorganization. Although the Cubans had been welcomed by the Congolese population, everyone had a low impression of the rebel leadership. Kabila and Mitoudidi were perceived as strangers, or more pejoratively as "tourists", since they were "never there when they were needed". The commanders most responsible "spent days drinking, and then had huge meals without disguising what they were up to from the people around them. They used

up petrol on pointless expeditions." The Cubans diagnosed the basic problem on the ground to be lack of training. That was what they were there for. But how was it to be organized?

While waiting for the arrival of Kabila, the Cubans had to make do with Mitoudidi, the only senior Congolese leader with whom the Cubans had had any dealings. But on 7 June, in an unexplained accident, Mitoudidi was drowned in Lake Tanganyika. There were conflicting accounts as to how this happened, and questions about whether it was murder or an accident. It left the Cubans with inadequate political liaison with the Congolese revolution.

Instructions came from Kabila in Dar es Salaam in the middle of June, brought by Joseph Mundandi, that the Cubans should organize an attack on "Front de Force", a Tshombe garrison at Bendera on the inland road towards Albertville. The soldiers were there to guard a hydro-electric plant on the River Kimbi. The plan was for the attack to be led by Mundandi's Rwandan soldiers with the help of 50 Cubans. Guevara was told that the Bendera barracks was the largest in the area, with perhaps 300 *askaris*, and 100 Belgian mercenaries.

Guevara was unhappy about the project, for he could see that the hydro-electric plant was extremely well defended. Many of his men were still ill, and unprepared for combat, and he thought it would be a political error for the first major engagement to be conducted by soldiers who would be considered as "foreign" troops. The Congolese admitted that they had tried to capture the barracks twice before, but they explained that it was the nearest, and therefore the most desirable, target. Guevara's alternative strategy was to attack a smaller target, to take some prisoners, and to improve their information about the enemy, but after much heated discussion, it was decided that any action would be better than endless inaction.

On 20 June, a combined force of some 40 Cubans, with Tutsi and Congolese soldiers, set off to the west and made preparations to attack the plant and barracks at Bendera. The operation was doomed from the start, and made more difficult by the fact that the Tutsi soldiers did not speak Swahili. When it came to an actual battle, many of them ran away,

the Congolese refused to take part, and four Cubans were killed. Their papers and diaries were captured. Guevara's worst fears were realized, for the Tshombe regime would now have concrete evidence that Cubans were participating in the rebellion.

Although the Bendera battle appeared to the Cubans to be a disaster, Colonel Hoare, the mercenary leader, was rather impressed. He reckoned that his task would not be easy. He had arrived in Albertville in early July, after visiting Johannesburg to recruit a further 500 mercenaries. With a fresh six-month contract from Tshombe and General Mobutu, he had orders to crush the eastern rebellion once and for all. He was aware of the presence of Cubans, but he had no inkling of the presence of Che Guevara. He writes in his memoirs that "observers had noticed a subtle change in the type of resistance which the rebels were offering the Leopoldville government. Whereas it had been of a reasonably passive nature – 'what we have, we hold' – now it was becoming more aggressive. The change coincided with the arrival in the area of a contingent of Cuban advisers, specially trained in the arts of guerrilla warfare . . ."

Any doubts about the presence of the Cubans, Hoare wrote, "vanished with the discovery of a dead Cuban" after the raid on Bendera. "His diary and passport confirmed that he had travelled from Havana via Prague and Peking, in both of which places he had undergone extensive training. An entry in the diary had the clarion ring of truth, where he described that the Congolese rebels 'were too damned lazy to carry the 76mm cannon and its heavy shells'."

The battle at Bendera, where the Congolese and the Tutsi soldiers had proved so inadequate, was a pivotal moment in the campaign, for it was followed for the first time by much defeatism in the Cuban camp. If the Congolese were not prepared to fight, what on earth were the Cubans doing there? Several members of the Cuban troop told Guevara that they would like to leave and return to Cuba.

There were additional reasons for gloom that month, for the international clouds were beginning to darken. The third Cuban group, travelling via Algiers in June, had only just missed being caught in a coup d'état. On

Ernesto "Che" Guevara was one of the greatest exemplars of the revolutionary 1960s, an essential player in the Cuban Revolution whose legend fired the imaginations of a whole generation. In 1965, amid worldwide conjecture, Guevara left Cuba, where he was a minister in Fidel Castro's post-revolutionary government, and traveled incognito to the heart of Africa. People's hero Patrice Lumumba had been assassinated, and Guevara was sent to put his theories of guerrilla warfare into use, helping the oppressed people of the Congo throw off the yoke of Western imperialism. The first task was to assist the young Laurent Kabila in his struggle against Mobutu and Tshombe, the two key figures in the newly independent nation.

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